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DROUGHT GRIPS NEARLY HALF OF U.S.

According to NOAA's National Weather Service, the United States is in the midst of a worsening drought, following the warmest winter on record. This threat to individuals, agriculture, and industry throughout the country brought together representatives of the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. Department of Interior, as the federal government issued its first spring drought forecast.

"The news is not good," declared Secretary William Daley of the U.S. Department of Commerce. "The drought of 1999 remains with us in the new century – and our data indicate drought conditions are probably going to get worse before they get better."

Several southern states experienced their driest February on record; and the spring drought outlook released today appears bleak.

"The La Niña pattern which has dominated the United States for the past two years has created a serious moisture deficit in many areas. This could seriously impact farmers, water resource managers, navigation interests and the tourism industry. Forewarned is forearmed," said NOAA Administrator D. James Baker.

The spring drought forecast says the drought is going to persist and, in some areas, intensify. Hardest hit will be southern Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Florida and Georgia in the south, and Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana in the north central U.S.

Secretary Dan Glickman of the U.S. Department of Agriculture noted, "We saw -

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last summer just what a drought can do to farmers. Looking to the future, we need to be ahead of the curve, prepared for dry weather when it comes and equipped with the mechanisms that will protect farmers and prevent widespread losses.”

Drought is a serious threat to the health, well-being and economy of the nation, causing economic and social losses comparable to that of major hurricanes. Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama all experienced their driest February in 106 years. Already this year wildfires have claimed 208,000 acres -- nearly four times the losses at this time last year. The areas impacted by the drought of 2000, according to NOAA, parallel the drought of 1988, which was the most costly weather disaster in history with an estimated \$40 billion in losses. The average annual cost of droughts is over \$6 billion.

Last year’s NWS climate forecast anticipated drier conditions in the southern U.S. According to Jack Kelly, Director of the National Weather Service, “This year, for the first time, we are issuing a drought forecast. We are able to do this because of the advances made by the climate research community.”

NOAA scientists also point out drier than normal conditions mean a reduced possibility of significant river flooding this spring. However, Kelly cautions communities to be on guard against severe weather and flash flooding.

U.S. Geological Survey Director Charles G. Groat noted, “Based on data from the USGS’s nationwide stream gage network, there are some areas of the country -- particularly east of the Mississippi River -- where streamflows are well below normal for this time of year. “Think of it as not having enough money in the bank. We have not had enough water during our normally wet winter to put in our groundwater bank for our normally dry summer and fall. We anticipate additional drought problems in the months ahead based on the below normal streamflows and groundwater levels we’re seeing now.”

The drought is expected to continue through spring.

The National Weather Service is an agency of the Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, dedicated to protecting lives and property through the timely issuance of weather, water and climate forecasts and warnings. Complete information is available at <http://www.nws.noaa.gov>.